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A Child's Journey

The Community Synagogue, Port Washington, New York, May 2000:

The petite, middle-aged woman with "salt and pepper" curls is in front of the congregation on Yom Hashoah, the service for the commemoration of the Holocaust. She is singing the solo part of the "Bird Song," based on a poem written by a child in Thereisenstadt in 1941. She chokes up on the lines, "And weave a wreath of memories there, / And if the tears obscure your way, / You will know how good it is to be alive." She is catapulted back in time to Wegrow, a small town in Poland, when her name is Gitl Przepiorka, and where a woman with a beautiful voice is singing a Yiddish lullaby, "Rhozhinkes un Mandlen", to her. The woman, with a familiar mole above her lip which Gitl, too, possesses on the side of her cheek, is the person who gives her the clear, soprano voice and her love of music. That woman is her mother, Esther Przepiorka, who never reached her 37th birthday.

***Poland, September 1, 1939*: German** *soldiers invade Poland and occupy the country within three weeks. Jews have to step off the sidewalk for any German passing by. All Jews over twelve have to wear an armband with a Star of David on it. Gitl's older brother Yitzchak has to wear one. On Yom Kippur the Chief Rabbi of Wegrow is rudely removed from the synagogue, tortured, and killed.*

Wegrow, Poland was a small town known for its tanneries. In 1940 the Jewish population was about 55% of its entire population. Jews had lived there from the 1600's on. By 1944 the percentage was zero… Gitl's father, Mendl Przepiorka, and one of her five paternal uncles had a small, but thriving, leather factory where they made the upper parts of shoes and boots. The family lived in an apartment above it.

Her father was one of the ten children born to her grandparents, Rachel and Pinchas. Her mother also came from a large family, but they did not live close by. The love of this large family, as well as her place in it – the last after two children 10 and 12 years old when she was born, enveloped her like a soft, warm security blanket. Her mother was a teacher by training, and had a beautiful singing voice. "Don't stop, mama. Please keep singing," she would beg her mother. She celebrated milestone events and played hide and seek with her two older brothers, Yitzhak and Shmulik. Hiding under the bed was so much fun. She was the only one who could fit under it! Their home, it turned out, was very conveniently located for the implementation of Nazi policy—only about 14 miles from the Treblinka death camp.

Hiding was soon to cease being a game, and become a method of survival.

One cold dark, night in 1942, she walked through the woods with her mother. They stopped at a strange farmhouse, where an unfamiliar woman welcomed them. Her mother carried a little suitcase with her daughter's possessions and a heavy down comforter, a "*perineh*". Her mother told her, gently, that she had to stay with this woman. "And you, too, Mama?" the child asked. Her mother shook her head and began to leave. Three-year old Gitl clutched her mother's coat, began to scream, and tried to follow her mother. But she was restrained, and her mother walked out, quickly closing the door behind her. The kindly woman tried to comfort the child. "Don't cry. You'll have a glass of warm milk. You'll take a nice bath. And tomorrow you'll be a big girl." The next morning Gitl woke up with swollen eyes, and asked, "Am I a big girl now?"

She had to become "a big girl" very quickly. For that was the last time she saw her Mother.

The woman, Mrs. Kowalchik, was soft-spoken, kind and patient. But there were days filled with tears, loneliness and longing. Gitl seldom smiled, ate little, and cried a lot. She especially missed the lullabies in her own mother's beautiful voice, the familiar dark mole above her mother's lip, the handsome faces and the good-natured laughter of her older brothers and her father. Time passed. As the seasons changed, the memory of her own, natural family faded. Her mother's singing, however, was imprinted on her heart and in her own voice, and has remained a blessing for her, all her life.

The gentleness and love of this generous woman, Mrs. Kowalchik, whom she called "matka", (mother), helped her get through the dark days. Unlike others at that time, Gitl felt no material deprivation of any kind. Food always seemed to be plentiful for her. She ate hearty black bread smothered with chicken fat and salt. It was one of her favorites. There was always a huge vat of warm milk, fresh from the cow, in the big room. The little girl had even seen the cow being milked. One day Gucia, (her new name now was Gucia Kowalchik), asked for a glass of milk and a salami sandwich. Her Matka said, "You can't have milk with salami." She continued, in a hushed, almost inaudible voice, "You're Jewish, but don't tell anybody."

Gucia usually played alone for there were no children her age around the farm. She had no toys. Her favorite pastime was picking the wild, brightly-colored flowers at the side of the dirt roads nearby, and making flower crowns for herself and her matka.

In the summer she meandered in the garden among the fruit trees and the flowers. She picked fresh cherries right off the tree. She has never re-experienced the deliciously ripe taste of those cherries. She was with matka and her daughter one gorgeous summer day,

when German soldiers appeared. Matka's daughter said "Show them how you sing and dance." And the soldiers echoed, "Sing for us, dance for us, and we'll give you '*tsukerki*', (candy). Somewhat shyly, she obliged them. They allowed her to live another day.

One day Gucia innocently entered the barn. There she saw two legs in the hay. She ran into the house screaming wildly, "There are Jews in the barn! There are Jews in the barn." (She had no idea what "Jews" meant, but from the conversations around her she must have assumed it meant something to be afraid of.)

"I took care of them. Don't worry," said Matka. It wasn't until many years after she left Poland that she came to understand why matka had said that. There had been two Jewish women in the barn, but matka transferred them swiftly into the attic. Even her husband didn't know. He frequently drank heavily so Matka was afraid he would reveal she was hiding Jews. She, therefore, kept their identity a secret even from him. Those two also survived the war.

The little girl's bed was under a picture of the Holy Mother, Mary, the *Matka Boska*. She had seen it in the church she attended every Sunday with Matka. More than once was she suddenly and abruptly awakened to find a flashlight shining in her face. More than once did she see that flashlight in the hands of those menacing, leather-booted soldiers. How did they know where to look? Had someone led them to Mrs. Kowalchik's in hopes of getting a pound of sugar as a reward for finding a Jew?

"Show these soldiers how you say your prayers," Matka would say. Sleepy-eyed and terrified, little Gucia kneeled, put the two palms of her hands together, and recited the prayer in perfect Polish. The soldiers left. They found no "Juden" in this house that night.

The spring and summer came and went. It was time to cover those carefree, bare feet with shoes. Roads where the flowers had been were now knee-deep in snow. The Christmas tree glowed brightly with beautiful ornaments. Among them were bell and star-shaped cookies with green sprinkles. The tree was in the room where Gucia slept. If she awoke in the middle of the night she could help herself to a crisp, sprinkled snack. In a corner of the room was a pail, so she would not have to go outside to the outhouse in the night frost.

Soon Gucia was old enough to attend school. Since she had not started her education with the other children in the class, she had some catching up to do. She had to learn the entire Polish alphabet in the space of about three days. Till late into the night, she studied. Oh the tears of frustration as she would forget some of the letters! Her matka's patience helped her learn it eventually. In school, she would be called up to the teacher's desk to read individually. She fearfully approached the teacher's desk, with knees trembling. But she must have managed to do it reasonably well, as he often gave her a backhanded compliment. "If she can do it, why can't the rest of you?" She saw those classmates who were punished for lack of preparation or school infractions holding

weights on their shoulders in the back of the room, or wearing a "dunce" hat. She did not want to be one of them.

May 1945, Kowalchick household:

A slightly familiar woman, Gucia's Aunt Norma enters with a beautiful doll and carriage. She speaks discreetly to Matka, words Gucia cannot hear. Later Gucia is to learn that her Aunt Norma escaped the hell-fire by jumping off a stalled train on the way to Treblinka death camp. Since no one of her large family beside Gucia was left alive, Norma went to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. There she met William Schneiderman who later became her second husband.

At long last Hitler was gone, and the war was over. Matka made her a beautiful new hat and coat, and told her they were "going on a trip." Gucia made sure to bring her doll and carriage, the first and only toy she had in many years. They went to *Yelena Gura,* (yellow mountain). It was a strange new place. Gucia was charmed by the huge, red windmill. Matka was certain no one would find them there.

Displaced Persons Camp, Germany, June, 1945:

American Soldiers are administering the camp. There are a number of them in a large room with a group of survivors. A young woman with lively green eyes, her curly, dark hair in a kerchief, seems agitated, her eyes darting back and forth from one soldier to another. She cannot speak English, so she just shouts out names: "New York! Bronx! New York! Esther, Max! Bernstein! Bronx! New York!. The woman is Norma Przepiorka, who along with her six-year old niece Gitl is the only survivor of the large Przepiorka family. She is trying to make some kind of contact with her older sister Esther, who has immigrated to America in the 1920's. A tall, handsome American soldier, Phil Kaplan, hears her cries in disbelief. He speaks to her in broken Yiddish. Esther and Max Bernstein are his next door neighbors. And their son, Sam, also in the army, is his best friend! He sends the message to his mother on Mosholu Parkway in the Bronx!

Yelena Gura, Poland, August 1946:

One day two men arrived in what, to Gucia looked like a big black "moving box on wheels". She had never seen a car, which was an oddity in Wegrow, among horses and buggies, the usual travel mode. They were representatives of the American Jewish Congress. The men entered the house and spoke to matka—something about America. Then they tried to convince Gucia to go for a ride with them. They promised candy and cookies, interesting sights, and fun. Gucia would only go if matka went, too. She didn't. But Gucia was forcefully removed to the car. She never saw her matka again.

It was nightmarish. The traumatic separation from her "matka" yet again, deadened her memory of ensuing events. After a few days she found herself at an airport. There was a strange woman who was with her, a woman with terrible, newly formed scratches on her face. Gucia wondered where those terrible scratches came from. The woman told her that "a cat" had done it. It didn't take her long to figure out. In her wild, uncontrollable, terrified moments she had been the "cat."

The next stop was an orphanage run by Lutheran nuns, in Goteborg, Sweden. Their white headgear gave her an eerie feeling. Everyone looked the same. She had her own room, which she had to keep tidy and clean. As a seven-year old she felt quite proud to have this responsibility, and was conscientious about her chores. Not so satisfying were the long, institutional tables where meals were eaten. She hated the herring. Some kids even tried to force it down her throat. Whenever she could, she would throw it a few places ahead under the table. To this day, she winces if a herring dish is even in the same room with her.

It was here that she got another first name, Guta, but repossessed her family name, Przepiorka. So now she was Guta Przepiorka. It was in this place that she learned to ride a two-wheeler, had her tonsils removed, and befriended a deaf and dumb little boy. It was here that she first saw the beautiful, Swedish Christmas tradition of crowns with candles. Here she learned Swedish, her first foreign language. It was not to be her last language. A long ship voyage to Canada awaited her.

Bronx, New York,The Elsemere Caterers, May 1947

The marriage of a young man from Montreal and his bride from New York is being celebrated. At one of the tables sit two middle-aged couples, Esther and Max Bernstein from New York, and Fannie and Abe Morantz from Montreal. They are all of Eastern European background, and both in the meat business. "I have my brother's little girl coming, Esther says. "She and my youngest sister are the only ones left alive from my family. She can't come directly to New York until her immigration quota number comes up. Can you keep her for about 3½ weeks until she can come to us? Of course I will pay any expenses."

December 1947

There was a nauseating crossing of the rough ocean. The seven-year old was seasick the whole time. A young woman of about twenty-one, Fela, was in charge of her. It seems there were many older children taking care of younger children.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, December 1947:

The Aquitania, a ship under British registry arriving from Sweden, docked in the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia with its precious cargo—children. They were children of all ages who had one thing in common. Not one of them was with their parents. Among them was a cross-eyed, dark and curly-haired youngster with her ragged, cardboard suitcase. In it she carried some unmatched, ill-fitting clothing, and a treasured possession—a framed picture of Jesus.

The picture of Jesus had been a constant in her life. It was unchanging, always there, and a source of security for her. Not so her name. It had already changed three times, and it was yet to change three more times. Her voyage was not a trip—it was really part of a life's journey.

Montreal, December 20, 1947:

The Victoria train station was a busy place. Waiting for her were about 15 unfamiliar people. A short, middle-aged, well-dressed woman with beautiful platform, ankle-strap shoes and very curly hair under a fashionable hat picked her out of the long moving line of children. "Here she is. This is the one. This is my brother's little girl." This was her Aunt Esther, her father's oldest sister, who had fulfilled her brother's request to get his baby safely to America if she were to survive. She was able to locate little Gitl through the American Jewish Congress, which sent two men to Yelena Gura, Poland after receiving a message from her sister through her neighbor's son. This woman with the same first name as her natural mother was going to become her third and last "mother", eventually.

But it was to a slightly younger, attractive woman in an elegant winter-white hat to whom the little girl gravitated. Who was she? She was Fanny Morantz, *her Aunt Fannie* to this day. She was to be Guta's *temporary* adoptive mother during her stay in Montreal.

What was to be about 3 ½ weeks turned into 3 ½ years. Life was teeming with possibilities, growth, new family and friends. It was here Guta became Gloria, and her last name now became Morantz, after her new family. She got two new "sisters" and a "brother". And as a nine-year old she became an aunt, to Aunt Fannie's infant grandchildren. She became somewhat of a polyglot, learning French, Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. She insisted on speaking Polish for the first few months, since Aunt Fannie was fluent in it. She became proficient in English very quickly, though she refused to speak it. "Pesach is coming, you're not allowed to speak Polish here. It's either English or Yiddish," ordered her new "sister" Shirley. From then on English became her dominant language.

The Morantz family cherished their Jewish heritage, and Abe Morantz was an observant Jew. Every Shabat Uncle Abie went to synagogue. You could hear his deep, rich voice chanting the traditional music on holidays and celebrations. Imagine their surprise when a little girl showed up in their home, with her most treasured possession, a picture of Jesus.

Somehow, that picture of Jesus ceased to be precious. It just disappeared, without dismay or trauma for Gloria. The richness and variety of her own, Jewish tradition replaced it. The family celebrations, the warm gatherings, the beautiful music, and the frequent visits to the Fairmount Synagogue facilitated the embrace of her "new" religion. The warmth and love of her new adoptive family cemented all this. They helped her overcome fear and shyness, and join the ranks of normal childhood. Her first toys on this continent were a doll crib and a tea set, which she used for"selling" tea to houseguests. Though already eight years old, she had to recapture some games of childhood that she had missed. She had a lot of growing up to do.

Grand Central Station, New York, April 5, 1951:

The 3½ weeks in Montreal turned into 3 ½ years. Finally, Gloria's immigration number ***came*** *up. By now she had become deeply attached to her Montreal family. Leaving them was more difficult than she could ever have imagined. Though, unlike her previous families, she would be able to see this family periodically, for months she was sad, brooding, seemingly depressed. She lost her appetite. She was leaving this beloved family who gave her back her heritage, and going on the last lap of her journey, to her Aunt Esther and Uncle Max in New York.*

Esther and Max became "Mom" and "Pop", their sons became Gloria's brothers, and she became a "Bernstein." From teen to adulthood the journey continued. Another name awaited as she met her partner in life, Miles. They reaped the blessings of their love in two wonderful children, Craig and Jordana. Her life's work became molding young minds as a teacher, but her passion became keeping the story of the Holocaust alive. She teaches children and adults the lessons of man's inhumanity to man, and about the hate and indifference that led to it – in the hope that it will not happen to anyone again.

After presenting a Holocaust program in school, one of her students asked the following question: "If you could speak to your real mother and father for three minutes, what would you say to them?" She responded:

"You and your pain are not forgotten. The suffering of our people is not forgotten. The Jewish people still lives. You have two beautiful grandchildren, who will pass on our heritage. They are humane, intelligent, and delightful. You would have loved them dearly. You would have been proud of me, your youngest child. I have a rich and full life, filled with love, friendship, family, and joy. I have been blessed with good health and educational opportunity. My work enables me to make a difference in children's lives. In addition, Mother, my life is filled with music, a gift from you. You are alive in my heart always."

"Yes the tears obscured my way, /And I know how good it is to be alive...